...Now What Are We Supposed to Do? Part II: Boundaries (You Do You, & Be the Change You Wish to See)

JTO, Ph.D. **November 5, 2022** **Uncategorized**

By now you've read Part I of this series (or not, ahem), which addressed how you might persuade the people in your life to protect themselves and others from Covid. But what if you're just minding your own business, yet those people won't stop trying to persuade *you* to just forget about Covid and take your mask off? You may want to establish some boundaries with those guys before they send your blood pressure through the roof – especially since the holidays are coming, and you know they're going to expect you to make an appearance at their dinner table.

Personal boundaries are the limits we set for ourselves and the people we interact with, so that we can be safe and comfortable during those exchanges. They specify the sorts of attitudes, values and behaviors we're willing to put up with, and the activities or types of exchanges we aren't and in which we won't participate. Types of boundaries include *physical* (limits that relate to our own bodies and protect our health and safety), *sexual* (limits that relate to the sexual activity we're willing to engage in), *social* and *professional* (limits that relate to our social and work-related interactions, including how we spend our work and personal time), and *emotional* (limits on how we allow people to respond to us and to our thoughts and feelings). Maintaining boundaries can also be a way to model prosocial behavior and provide information about how others should be treated, in general. However, the primary purpose of boundary setting is to put people on notice as to how we expect them to treat us *personally* (regardless of what other people are doing or putting up with), and to let people know what will happen if they disregard our needs.

Setting boundaries is something that clinical psychologists often help clients to do. I'm not and have never been a clinician, so this was never explicitly my professional area. However, health psychology often bridges the gap between social and clinical

fields. My HIV risk reduction research included work on interventions to help folks communicate their sexual boundaries with various sorts of partners – anyone from long-term, committed boyfriends to brief hookups during which people might not even speak to each other. For more than a decade, I also served as Conservator of Person for an adult with a "Cluster B" personality disorder, which is a type of mental health issue characterized in part by difficulties respecting other peoples' boundaries; so I've been around this block a few times. And recently, someone on Twitter (I'm sorry, I've forgotten who, because I was lying in a hospital ER at that moment) asked me to make suggestions about how we can maintain our own Covid mitigation boundaries among people who keep trying to break them down. This is a really important topic, so I'll give it a shot.

Sometimes Covid-related boundaries are limits you negotiate with other people. For instance, if you co-parent, you may need to negotiate with your parenting partner about whether and when the kids will get vaccinated, when they will wear masks (and what kind they will wear), and what activities the family will participate in when infection rates are, in your view, problematic. How relationship or household partners negotiate these decisions depends on their relationships, and is beyond the scope of even a bloated essay; in some households, these exchanges are straightforward, but in others, they are fraught and may even require mediation by an outside party.

On the other hand, personal boundaries that you set for yourself are easier to navigate, because, in essence, you aren't making decisions about what other people can do, only about what *you* will expose yourself to; boundaries should only be about other people's behavior to the extent that it directly affects you. Those other people can continue to engage in as much risk behavior as they insist on – they just can't involve *you*, or do it in the spaces you control (like your home). Generally, these boundaries should be established *proactively*. Sometimes we assume other people know and respect our limits when they don't, and so we end up needing to affirm or create boundaries on the fly. But that's often harder, as we tend to feel like we're "on the defensive" when we're being *reactive* to a situation in which we aren't comfortable; it's better to come into a situation with other people already knowing where we draw the line.

A. **Boundary Setting**: The first step in setting boundaries is to decide what level of risk behavior you're willing to tolerate. This sounds obvious, but many people aren't even comfortable thinking about what their personal limits are (or making a distinction between what they really *need* to have happen and what would just be *nice*). But if you don't decide beforehand what your boundaries are, you won't be able to avoid situations in which those boundaries are likely to be violated, and you may not know how to respond when you get there. For instance, if you know you *prefer* to

be around people who are wearing N95s, but you haven't defined a clear boundary for yourself, you may not know how to respond when your friend promises to wear a N95 when she drives you to an appointment, but then shows up wearing a cloth mask or no mask at all.

Sometimes you may feel that making an exception to your stated boundary is justified or necessary. For example, before I had my cardiac catheterization following my recent heart attack, I asked the procedure team if they would switch from their surgical masks to N95s, but they said no. This was distressing to me (in terms of both my personal risk and my estimation of their common sense). But the risk of not having the procedure was greater than the Covid-related risk in that situation, so I went ahead with it anyway. If I were a scheduling a dental cleaning and my dentist similarly refused an N95, the Covid risk would *not* be justified to me, and so I wouldn't make the appointment or would walk out if I arrived to find the dentist not appropriately attired.

These "exceptions to the rule" can be a little amorphous and hard to pin down, so it's important to have a thorough think about where you're willing to set your Covid risk boundaries. For example, what does a public space need to look like for you to feel safe and comfortable there? Do windows need to be open or an air purifier running? How many people are you comfortable being around; do you need to see greater levels of mitigation in spaces where there are many people crowded together or lots of people coming through over time (like performance venues, public transportation, houses of worship, and classrooms or lecture halls) than in spaces where only a few people congregate over time (like at a small work meeting)? What about private venues, like at a friend's home, or in a car? What if the situation involves some level of mitigation, but also involves risk – like at a gathering where some people are wearing N95s, but some aren't or are wearing them incorrectly? And in what situations are boundaries that are normally hard limits for you subject to re-negotiation?

While you're reflecting is also a good time to look for where you may be establishing <u>inconsistent</u> boundaries. For example, people typically tend to feel less safe among strangers in new places than among others they know well (like friends or family) or in settings where they've often been before. This aspect of the **familiarity heuristic** means that we often have a hard time accurately assessing how "risky" another person or a setting might be (both in general and to us). Especially if someone is similar or close to us or we like them a lot, we are likely to underestimate their risk to us, *trusting* both that they are "safe" (even though there's no inherent reason for them to be safer than anyone else is) and that we would know if they tried to deceive us about their risk behavior. (We won't.) This biased way of evaluating our own friends and spaces is one reason the "know your partner" message backfired during early HIV

interventions; that the "make a social bubble" campaign similarly backfired during the early days of Covid (honestly, what were they thinking? I was *gobsmacked* the US government made that same mistake again); and that people tend to crash their cars close to home, on roads where they feel safest. What is familiar may *feel* safe, but familiarity is no reason to let your guard down.

Even so, you may well have created one set of Covid mitigation boundaries for when you're at the market among strangers, and another for when you're at church, where you know everyone. You may be looking for good ventilation at the doctor's office, yet ignoring the total lack of air movement at your daughter's house. This is a problem because, though these distinctions may seem reasonable to you, they won't be to anyone judging your requirements – to them, you will seem inconsistent and arbitrary, and your boundaries will seem capricious and performative. And, they will reason, if you break your own rules for some of the people, some of the time, then why not break those rules now, for them? (If you've been getting that sort of "limit testing" by family members, this may be why; for them, whether and for whom you're willing to bend the rules may have become a test of fidelity or how much you "love" them.) The bottom line is that, if you don't want pushback from other people on your boundaries, you need to be mindfully consistent about the conditions for which you set them, and make that consistency clear to people.

Finally, making clear decisions about your boundaries *ahead of time* is especially important given that the Covid landscape keeps changing. We used to have information on positivity rates to guard our decision making (at least, theoretically); now, unless you have good access to wastewater surveillance data in an area where it's well sampled, you don't have much to go on. But despite this lack of good guidance, when you are deciding to engage in an activity for which the risk is variable, you've got to know (as Kenny Rogers once sang) when it's time to fold 'em; or to walk away, or to run. And write down where those various lines in the sand are for you, so you don't forget – or misremember, or argue with or second guess yourself about – them later.

As an example: in 2021, a friend of mine decided to send her high-risk kids back to in-person learning, after having held them out of school for some time. (She wasn't thrilled about it, but the school had put a time limit on returning.) She controlled what she could: the kids wore masks, and she pulled them every day for lunch so that they could eat outside under her supervision. But she knew that the situation was likely to change over time – fewer other people at school would be wearing masks as the pandemic progressed, class infections would rise during surges, and perhaps the school would stop allowing separate lunch spaces. I advised her to set firm boundaries ahead of time, just in her own mind, for what the landscape would need to look like for her to pull the kids out again. Would it be a school requirement to eat in the

cafeteria with everyone else? A certain number of kids out sick in one of her kid's classrooms? My friend said she'd set her future limits for keeping the kids at school, but now that all the mitigation measures have, indeed, been dropped (except that her own kids are still masking) and there have been in-school surges, her kids are still there. When you're already in a situation, it can be *so hard* not to keep shifting the line – to say "it would be rude to walk out now" or "I'll just stay a little longer," or to rationalize the increased risk by saying "what I'm doing myself (which is probably just mask wearing) is probably sufficient; after all, I've stayed safe so far." Sometimes the people we fight most with about our boundaries are ourselves. That's why it's so important to make decisions about risk when you're clear headed and objective, which is to say, before you've entered a given situation – not when the risk is already handing you a piece of delicious looking cake at the party.

The bottom line is that you can't convey your boundaries to people or hold them to your limits if you aren't sure what those parameters are, yourself, or if they change with the situation.

B. **Boundary Maintenance:** Then there's the part in this process where, as Yoda would say, there is no *try*, only *do*. Your primary goal is to communicate your boundaries to other people while *minimizing discussion* – because that takes on a life of its own. Some tactics that may help with this task include:

1. Make clear this is about you, not about them. Say "*I am (not) willing to*," not "*you must (*or *can't)…*"

2. Make clear what the outcome of noncompliance with your boundary is. (A boundary that doesn't include consequences isn't a boundary; it's a suggestion or a favor request.) Typically, if the other person can't or won't accommodate your needs, the outcome is that you don't agree to engage in an activity, or if you've already begun, you stop. In some situations, there may also be consequences to the other person – for example, if you offered to take a friend shopping or to help them with a home repair as long as they wear an N95, but now they've taken it off, you will have to withdraw your offer. In such cases, try to remind the other person of your boundary without making threats. For example, the first time their mask comes down, you may just point to your own mask and say "mask up, please!" in a cheerful voice. The second time, say "for me to keep working on this, I need you to put your mask back on," rather than "put your mask on or I'm leaving." The consequence is the same, either way, but in the former case, you focus attention on your needs, not on their noncompliance. But don't feel guilty if you need to walk away or drive your friend right back to their house, even if your friend suggests you're leaving them in the lurch – they have chosen to break an agreement with you, and fixing things for them is not

your responsibility.

3. Keep emotion out of it. Boundary maintenance should be about getting what you need as simply as possible, while avoiding drama and conflict as much as you can. Your tone and manner should be friendly, calm and confident (*not* apologetic) – if people start getting frustrated or expressing anxiety or anger, it may be time to leave temporarily, and revisit the topic later – saying exactly that. For example, you can say "I'm going to step away now, and if you're feeling calmer later and are willing, we can come back to this then; however, please understand that my Covid precaution needs won't change." I'm a fan of physically leaving rather than just changing the subject, because doing the latter may cause the person to think you have "given in" and the issue is resolved, even though you haven't and it's not.

If someone is yelling at you, you don't need to interrupt them to explain that you're leaving; if they don't hear you say "you may not yell at me" or respond appropriately, just walk out or hang up the phone. (If you don't like the idea of hanging up on someone, say "I'm hanging up now," or "I need to go; I will speak to you later" and then hang up, even if they're still talking – I've done that many times.) If they make rude or snarky comments (like "you're too anxious about Covid," or "you're overreacting," or "you're being unreasonable,") pick *one* statement to respond with, such as "thank you for voicing your opinion; my Covid risk boundaries are what they are," and then be a *broken record*, responding each time with the same statement. Don't apologize, and don't debate; you do not need to defend your position, only to state what will and won't work for you, and that you have *committed* to these mitigation decisions. The other person will either agree to accommodate you, or they won't and you will not participate in the activity.

4. Let people know your needs beforehand. This is simply respectful. Don't show up at a gathering with a box of masks and expect everyone to put them on with no quarrel; you need to make your needs known to the host beforehand. If there's any doubt, explicitly establish how your needs are going to be met before the activity starts.

5. Offer an alternative, if there is one. This new activity might be something everyone could do together (say, have a party outside vs. inside), or something the other person could help you do (say, by setting up a livestream of worship services so you can attend virtually while others attend in person). In general, if you're offering an alternative, try to make sure you bear the brunt of the effort to carry it off – if you want your sister to move her birthday party outside but also expect her to do all the planning and setting up, she may view your suggestion as more of a power play than as a reflection of a legitimate boundary.

If some activities are completely off limits for you (say, going to a live performance), offering an alternative can affirm that you still value the relationship, and that will make it easier for the other person to feel positively about your decisions. You can say something like "That won't work for me because of the level of infection risk. What would work for me is for us to –." Note that you do *not* need to give a lengthy explanation, and in fact, doing so may give the other person the sense that you are open to negotiation. If that person is willing to comply with your boundaries, offering them a general explanation (like "the infection risk is too high" or "I am at high risk of serious infection") will typically be as compelling as a lengthy scientific discourse on aerosol transmission would be. If the person starts to argue, that's often a sign not that they need more information, but that they don't want to comply.

6. Acknowledge that a boundary could change in the future, if that seems likely. For example you could say "I'm not dining with people who aren't household members this winter, because Covid, flu and RSV rates are so high. How about we do a zoom meal together, and plan an in-person picnic for next summer?" (I had a fun zoom tea party with a friend last spring; we went a little overboard with the food, but that was the point.) If the other person asks if your boundary is permanent and you don't know, don't feel pressured to make an immediate decision. You can say "I may re-evaluate next summer, but this is what I'm doing right now and for the next few months, at least. I'll let you know if things change." If the person you're speaking with brings up an issue you truly hadn't considered that may change your boundary, say "I need to take some time to think about that. I will get back to you by [day, time]; for now, however, my limits are what they are." If, after taking time to consider on your own, you still don't want to change your boundaries, just send them a simple text or email that says "I've thought about what you said, but I still feel the same, so what I am willing to do is –." Work on conveying information as simply as possible and then ending the discussion; the longer it goes on, the more likely it is to devolve into a debate or argument.

7. Make sure you are explicit about expectations for activities that take place on your home turf. If you're having an outdoor gathering, make sure people know ahead of time whether they'll need to take a RAT before attending (or when they get there; sometimes people lie about whether they've tested, and they tell themselves it doesn't matter, because *of course* they're negative) or whether they'll need to don a mask to go inside to use the bathroom. If individual guests aren't being mitigation compliant at your home, take them aside (or, if they're a "plus one" whom you don't really know, take the person they came with) and remind them that you need compliance with your Covid rules. If a bunch of people are being noncompliant, clink a glass and say something like "attention beloved revelers [or, "hey, everybody!"] We all need to lift our masks back UP, so the party can continue!" If you have a family from hell that

promised they'd be good but then turned your house into the "wake" scene from the horror movie *Mother!*, tell them the party is *over*. Calmly turn off the music, start handing out coats, and open the door. If you need to, start flipping the lights off. (If they still won't go, *you* go.) And don't ask them over again, at least as a group; they can't handle it.

8. Overall, how much of an explanation you need to give for your boundaries may depend on the relationship, but it's generally less than you think. If a stranger is telling you to unmask in a public space, you owe that person *nothing*. (When I was getting my temperature screened with an ear thermometer outside my cardiologist's office recently, an older man said to me, bizarrely "take off your mask!" I simply replied "nope" and looked away to signal I was ignoring him, but he was lucky to get any verbal response at all.) If the troll persists, walk away; that person is aggressive. And if there is someone nearby who is in a position of authority, let them handle it – for instance, if the guy at the doctor's office had persisted, I would have said to the staffer taking temperatures "this man is harassing me; I need you to take care of this situation or call security immediately." A lot of the harassment people are facing (especially about mask or eye shield wearing) is from strangers; it can fill you with adrenaline and put a rotten spin on your day, but if you let it compromise your safety, you'll feel worse.

If the person is an acquaintance, you may wish to give a short explanation, especially if your boundaries have changed since your last interaction. (For example, you could say "I am being more careful now because it is winter/I am recovering from a recent illness/I have new risk factors," etc.) But if you're pressed for more information or a discussion, that's the time to shut it down, for example, by saying "I'm sorry, but I don't have time [or wish] to discuss details."

People you have an ongoing relationship with are entitled to know reasons for decisions that affect them too, and they may well be entitled to express how they feel about what you're asking of them – but not endlessly, and they should not persist in giving input after you've made clear you don't want it. (When my son was in the throes of his very argumentative early teens, my rule was: you get one solid explanation for decisions I make, but I will not discuss it further. If you are unsatisfied, you may write me a letter about why you feel that way; I promise to read it and reflect on your view, in my own time, but I will not necessarily speak to you further about it.")

9. Sometimes it's easier to apologize than to ask permission. When I visit the doctor, I just carry in my air purifier, in a case, and plug it in. That usually works fine, though in the hospital it didn't (because *their* boundaries stink.) If I were currently visiting

friends, I'd be only slightly more subtle, saying something like "check out my cool new air purifier – I've been wanting to show you this! Is this a good spot to plug it in?" while I hightail it over to the nearest wall socket.

10. If the other person doesn't want to comply, that's on them; you need to *walk away*. Acquiescing when someone ignores your stated needs simply sends the message that you'll allow your boundaries to be trampled on, and so they will do it again. When it comes to holding to your boundaries, folks: no try; do. If someone is disrespecting you, don't get mad, just walk away. (Many decades ago, when one of my step-brothers and I were about to graduate from high school, our blended family of seven was sharing a meal together. When my step-brother began making homophobic statements, the entire rest of the family simply stood up and silently left the table. There was no need for arguments, or attempts to convince him he was wrong – we just left, which preserved the peace far better than an argument would have.)

At some point after you exit the situation, you may need to engage in discussion to repair the relationship, but remember that you have done nothing wrong; there is nothing inappropriate with insisting on respect. What's inappropriate is when people push you to ignore your needs just to make them comfortable or affirm a power dynamic. So, for example, if you left your mother's house prematurely because she kept sliding her mask under her nose even after you reminded her not to, you may wish to write her a note affirming that you love her and want to see her, but only if she is wearing a mask properly. Affirm both your love and your limits, and don't leave the door open for further argument, even a crack. If there needs to be a cooling off period, so be it – but then, again, you should affirm both that you value the relationship and that your health and safety boundaries are non-negotiable, regardless of how much you care for the person or the relationship.

It is possible that some friends or family members you interact with won't accept this. They make their own decisions about what they are willing to do, which might include avoiding you or ending the relationship rather than adjusting their behavior to accommodate your needs. There is nothing you can do about this attitude; they own it. They have a right to make such a decision, as awful as it is. You can keep the door open by affirming that you would love to continue the relationship if/when they feel ready and able to accommodate your health/safety needs. But if they apologize for broken mitigation promises and then treat you badly again, don't give them an opportunity to test those waters a third time; just avoid situations in which they would have the option to make you physically uncomfortable or unsafe.

11. Practice, by rehearsing in front of a mirror or role playing with a sympathetic friend or family member. It can be really difficult to start asserting yourself in ways or

about topics that you never have before. For example, when my son was young, the American Academy of Pediatrics suggested that parents always ask, before a play date, whether there are firearms on the premises. (There is good reason for parents to find out: shootings are the leading cause of death among American kids, and 5% of these are accidental.) We lived in a rural area with no other kids in our neighborhood, so play dates were *really* important to us, and I found it pretty uncomfortable to pose the question "do you have any firearms in your home?" to parents who had generously invited my son over. But I did it. (Thankfully, only once did a homeowner have guns, and the mom showed me the locked gun case where the weapons were stored unloaded; I also remained to supervise during every gathering at her house. Those were the boundaries Id decided on previously.) It did get easier to ask about firearms over time, though it never really got *comfortable* because, fundamentally, asking that question is implying that the other person poses a risk; that they are "unsafe." The same is true when you ask someone to put on an N95. But sometimes you just have to get comfortable with being uncomfortable (which is always better than being violently ill, injured or dead). If people give you a hard time, that's a rather clear indication that they *don't* prioritize your safety. And that's really all you should need to know to steer clear.

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Physical boundaries – limits that protect your physical health and safety, like Covid mitigation boundaries – are the most basic, important boundaries you can set. Whenever possible, you don't want to leave those decisions to others; the person who cares most about your health and that of your family is you. Letting others disregard your infection risk decisions tells them that you believe their feelings are more important than both *your* feelings and your health and safety. And people often behave exactly as well or as badly as you allow them to, so holding folks accountable to accommodate your needs ultimately depends on you.

May the Force be with you, and the odds be ever in your favor, and all that…. I'm not into long summaries, so on to Part III, which is the last essay in this series. It's about the topic I think is most important, in terms of increasing Covid mitigation: *collective action*.

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